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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000152

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: INVESTIGATION STALLED ONE YEAR AFTER MURDER OF ACTIVIST  
MONK

REF: (05) CHIANG MAI 166 (MONK'S MURDER SEEN AS ATTEMPT TO SILENCE ACTIVISM)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Beatrice Camp , Consul General, Consulate Chiang  
Mai, State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: The 2005 murder of activist monk Phra Suphot Suwacho in Chiang Mai's Fang district remains unsolved, drawing comparisons with the fate of two other prominent Thai human rights activists. The stalled investigation has raised doubts about the government's commitment to resolving the case and curbed some political and social action in northern Thailand. End summary

12. (U) Phra Suphot Suwacho, a Buddhist monk whose activities put him in conflict with a variety of agri-business and Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party interests, was stabbed to death June 17, 2005 in the woods surrounding Mettatham Buddhist Temple in Fang district, Chiang Mai province. His colleague, Phra Kittisak Kitisophano, now leads the effort to push authorities to solve the murder, which he believes was politically motivated. Newspaper accounts have linked the lack of resolution in Phra Suphot's case to two other unsolved cases: the disappearance of Bangkok human rights attorney Somchai Nilapaichit and the assassination of Prachuap Khirikhan activist Charoen Wat-aksorn.

DOUBTS OVER OFFICIAL HANDLING

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13. (C) During a July visit by the Consul General to the Mettatham Buddhist Temple in Fang district, Phra Kittisak expressed his disappointment over the official handling of the case. Transfer of the case in July 2005 from the local police to the Minister of Justice's Department of Special Investigations (DSI) initially sparked hope that arrests would result. However, the subsequent failure of DSI to go beyond the initial police investigation led Phra Kittisak to doubt whether the authorities were truly interested in resolving the murder.

14. (C) Unhappy over the slow pace of investigation, Phra Kittisak, together with representatives from the Lawyer's Council of Thailand, the National Human Rights Commission and Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Watch, in July 2006 asked that the DSI release its findings. The DSI subsequently invited Phra Kittisak to two meetings in August in which he criticized the DSI's pursuit of a wide range of possible motives; he argued that the political role of the monks from Mettatham Temple and land encroachment by major agricultural interests are inter-connected and that the investigation should focus on finding "a ring" of those intent on intimidating the monks.

¶5. (C) According to an account he gave Consulate staff about the meetings with DSI, Phra Kittisak insisted that the investigation should probe the possible involvement of Fang TRT MP Santi Tansuhat: "While they seemed to admit that the assault on Phra Suphot could be premeditated, they did not want to talk about the mastermind of the plot. They have so far ignored my request that MP Santi be summoned for questioning."

¶6. (C) Phra Kittisak, who was the most outspoken and politically controversial of the three monks at the temple, is convinced the case is linked to his own and his colleagues' activities at the national level. In fact Phra Suphot may not have been the primary target of the murder; local intelligence contacts believe that the real aim was Phra Kittisak, as the leader of the temple.

#### ANTI-THAKSIN ACTIVITIES

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¶7. (C) The monks' activities included the use of the temple as a production house for the journal "Sekhiyatham" and a website, both frequently critical of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and TRT. Phra Suphot was instrumental in using his computer expertise to disseminate the writings of a number of social and political critics, including that of Phra Kittisak. Reportedly MP Santi complained to the district chief about the presence of this group of anti-government monks in his constituency.

¶8. (U) In addition to the monks' anti-Thaksin activities, the temple was known for its opposition to local land encroachment, part of a conflict that pits large-scale entrepreneurs against medium or small-scale farmers. In the last decade Fang has developed into a major tangerine-producing area using migrant labor and pesticide-heavy farming techniques.

¶9. (C) According to Phra Kittisak, representatives from the National Human Rights Commission, the Lawyers' Council of

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Thailand and the Metta Thammarak Foundation share his conviction that Phra Suphot's murder involved TRT politicians. He cited an incident two years ago when provincial officials came to inquire about the work of the monks at Mettatham Temple in Fang after Phra Kittisak participated in a panel discussion at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok opposing PM Thaksin's controversial plan to buy the Liverpool football club. He also related a warning from a sympathetic police officer before Phra Suphot's death about a newly transferred police officer who was close to the Fang MP and could pose a threat to the monks at this temple.

#### BUDDHIST ACTIVISM

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¶10. (U) The temple in Fang and its social activism are rooted in the Buddhist reform movement of Wat Suan Mok led by the late Buddhadas Bhikkhu. The monks at Wat Mettatham carried this legacy north in the late 1990s and joined the Metta Thammarak Foundation in setting up the temple in Fang district. Established in 1999 by well-known social critic Dr. Prawese Wasi, the Metta Thammarak Foundation combines Buddhism with democracy and human rights promotion. Social issues that the foundation has taken on include opposition to a Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline project in Songkhla, a power plant project in Prachuap Khirikhan, and dams on the Mekong. The foundation, now based in Chiang Mai, also supports cross-border programs to assist internally displaced Burmese along the Thai-Burma border and played a role in acquiring property for Dr. Cynthia Maung's Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot. More recently, the foundation began educating locals in Chiang Mai's northern Fang and Mae Ai districts about the plight of Burma's Shan State and the migrant Shan laborers in the district.

¶11. (C) Phra Suphot's death put a damper on the work of the

temple and the foundation. Publication of the Sekhiyatham journal ceased, along with the website. Since the murder, villagers have stayed away from the temple and shown reluctance to participate in interviews about the case with attorneys from the Lawyer's Council of Thailand. According to Phra Kittisak, those villagers who acceded to the interviews kept their comments superficial.

¶12. (C) Comment: Whether the murder of activist Buddhist monk Phra Suphot in June 2005 was tied in with national politics, local agricultural interests, or an unpremeditated act of violence, it has served to intimidate human rights and environmental activists. The fact that no suspects have been brought forward more than a year after the murder fits a familiar pattern in which those in power are able to stall investigations until public interest tapers off.  
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